



The Endurance Test: A Virtual Project Team's Lived Experience in an Online Project Management Course

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Abstract

This case study examines longitudinal data from an online MBA program's project management course to understand and describe the lived experience of a virtual student team that exhibited difficulty delivering a term project. Testing a theoretical model proposed by Lohle and Terrell (2016), the study affirms that unless students actively contact their instructor to escalate feedback and concerns about progress it is difficult to assess student contribution on virtual team projects. The instructor also actively solicited feedback and facilitated closure to compensate for a lack of student accountability. This prompted a research question asking whether requiring an online instructor's constant oversight and engagement is an optimal strategy for effective project delivery on virtual student teams.

Main Arguments

Research Method

The primary researcher conducted a qualitative case study analysis that explored the lived experience of one challenged student team engaged in a virtual team project during an online project management course.

Participant Sample, Duration, Assignment

The course learning management system (LMS) used in this study contains longitudinal data covering multiple team projects. The experience of one troubled project team consisting of three students was chosen because this team escalated more frequently than the others, required the most instructor intervention and was the only team that agreed to adjust their final project grade according to their contribution. Their progress was evaluated for the duration of one semester.

Methodology

This case study builds upon findings by Lohle and Terrell (2016) where feedback from online students who engaged in virtual team projects was used to generate a grounded theory to help online instructors facilitate such projects. The researchers analyzed feedback from thirty-four students taking a project management course in an online M.B.A. program. Students were assigned to self-managed work teams in delivering a research paper and asked to discuss their experiences while coming together over the first three weeks of this eight week course. Their feedback generated this theoretical model:

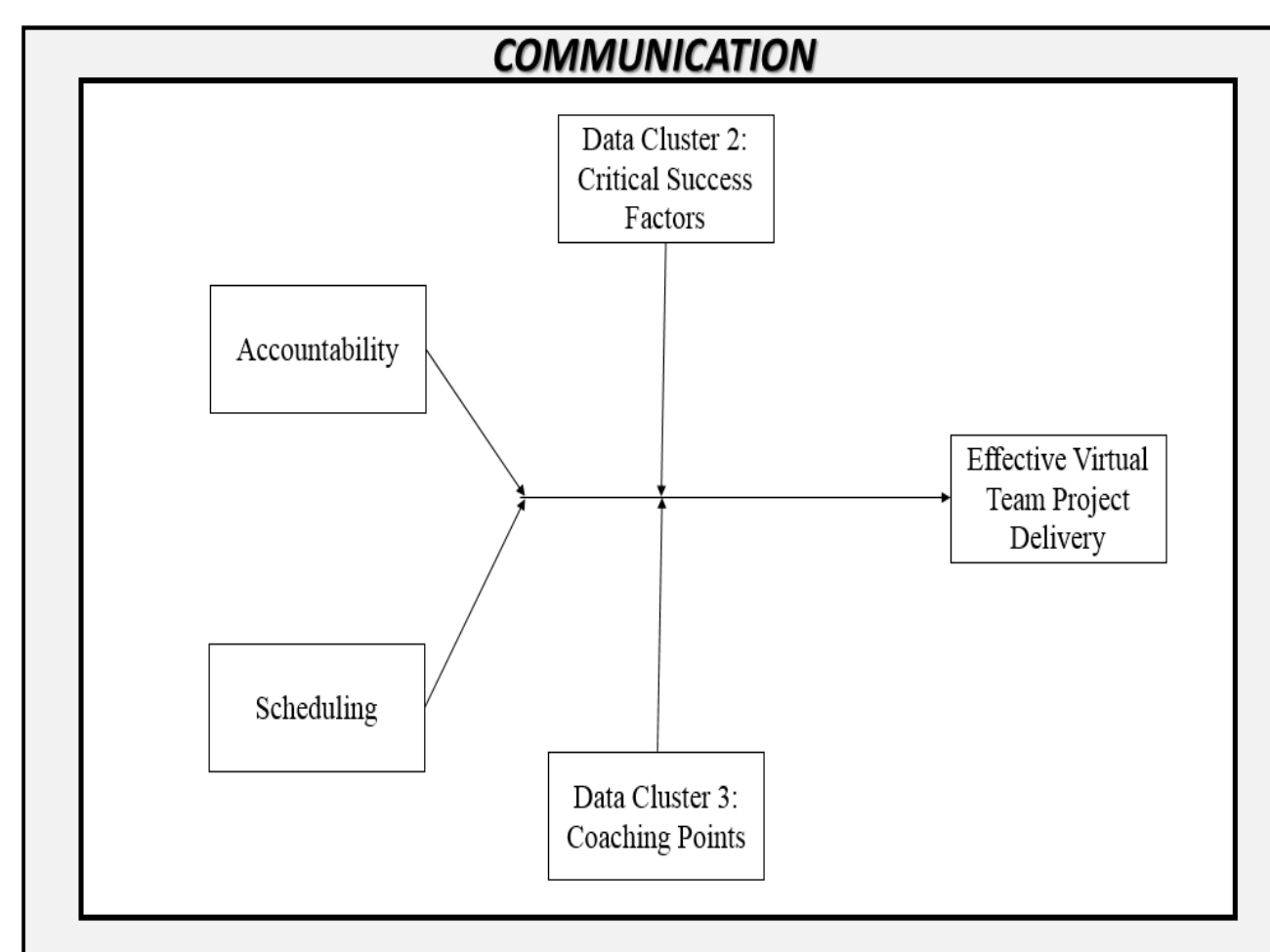


Figure 1: A Grounded Theoretical Model for Student Project Delivery on Virtual Teams.

Reference

Lohle M. & Terrell, S. (2016). Knowledge management using student feedback: A study of online students' lived experience on virtual teams. *Issues in Information Systems*. Volume 17, Issue 4, pp. 260 – 265.

Conclusion

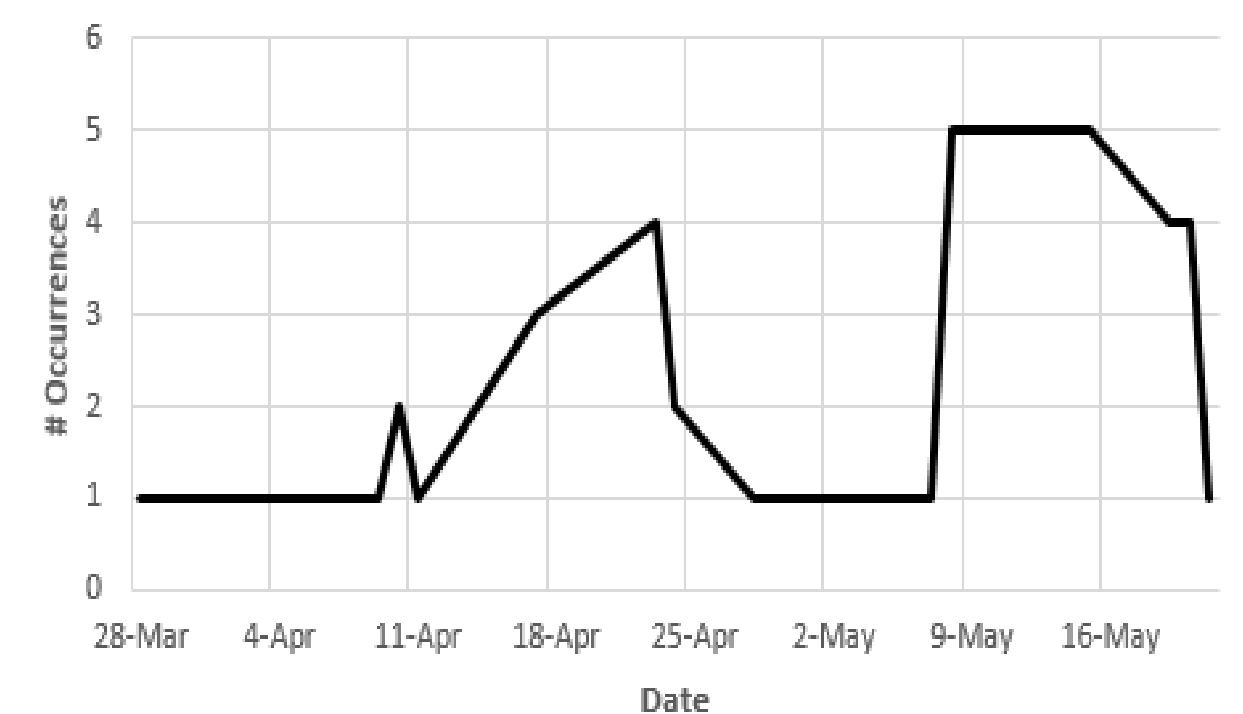


Figure 2. Number of Communication Occurrences by Date.

This graph shows two peaks, one that spikes and decreases midway through the project and a sustained plateau of heightened activity from early May through the end of the project.

Since intense activity on this project occurred at midpoint and then later for an extended period it seems apparent this team never came together to resolve its issues.

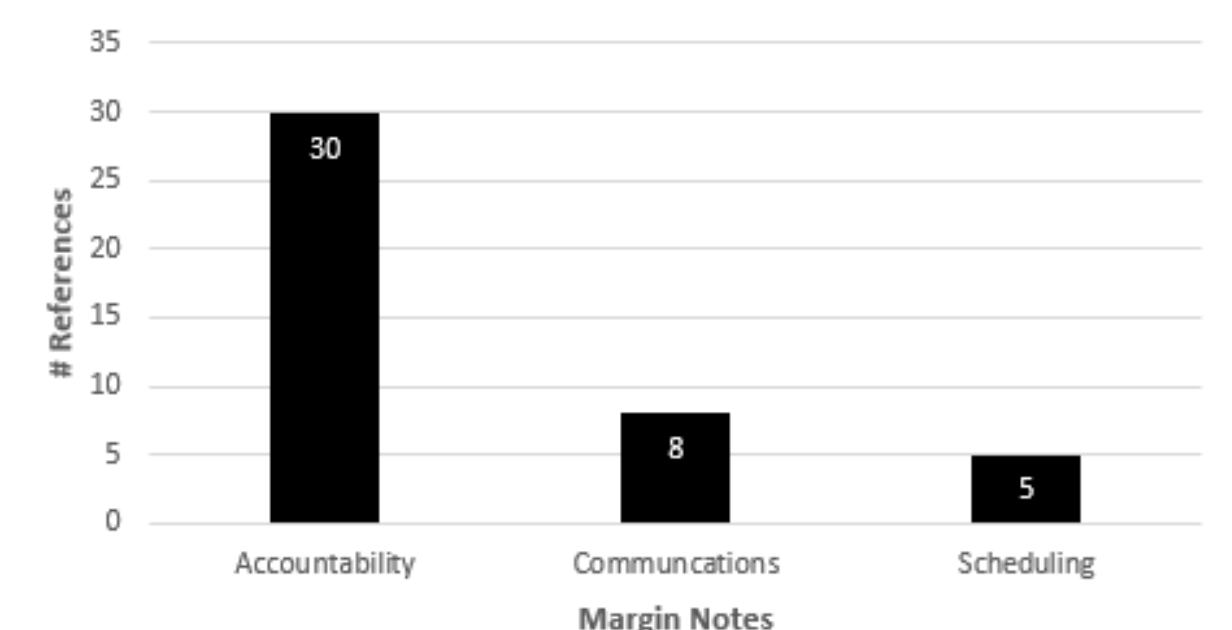


Figure 3. Count of Margin Notes' References to Accountability, Communications and Scheduling.

Evaluating Lohle and Terrell's (2016) theoretical model using this analysis, while the team experienced communication and scheduling issues accountability issues outstripped both by a wide margin. Team members were preoccupied with fostering accountability in others while avoiding their own accountability. Since the team under study exhibited constant rancor and an inability to meet their commitments it is apparent their trust evaporated.

Unfortunately, this team's tenacious lack of accountability ruined team trust. While this does not necessarily call the theoretical model into question, it suggests additional longitudinal studies are advisable to further understand the aspects of the model that are applicable for teams in various stages of success or duress. It would also be instructive to review the experience of a successful team from the same LMS data for comparison.

Research Question and Problem Statements

Is there a more effective way to ensure a virtual student team delivers than relying on constant instructor vigilance?

- The positive tone student teams adopted during their project status reports in this case study contradicted feedback sent to the instructor in other communications.
- Even with constant interaction both team and instructor invested considerable time and scrambled at project end to submit a viable work product.
- Unless students actively escalate to their instructor and the instructor aggressively responds it is difficult to assess student contribution.
- Responsiveness tends to degrade on virtual team projects in online courses because communications are sent electronically and the instructor and students are geographically distributed.